Evaluation of the Open Method of Coordination and the Structured Dialogue, as the Agenda for Culture's implementing tools at European Union level

Executive Summary

European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture

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Introduction

This *Evaluation of the Open Method of Coordination and the Structured Dialogue, as the Agenda for Culture's implementing tools at European Union level* provides an assessment of the extent to which the tools – the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) and the Structured Dialogue (SD) – contribute to the achievement of objectives set for the European Agenda for Culture.

The implementing tools (OMC and SD) of the European Agenda for Culture in a globalizing world[1] ("the Agenda") are intended to help bring together the various actors at European Union (EU) and Member State (MS) level to take action in pursuit of shared objectives and to address cultural challenges of European dimension. Such challenges include, most notably, the high fragmentation of the market for cultural works limiting the choice for consumers, lack of capacity to operate internationally and limited organisation of the cultural and creative sectors at EU level. At the same time, the design and implementation of the tools reflects both the requirements of the EU to act, as well as the (limits to the) competences of the EU in this field. Based on the principle of subsidiarity, action at EU level can address problems of European scale and dimension in a more effective way than can action by Member States or civil society stakeholders alone.

This evaluation comes in a period of reflection and future planning, such as those on Creative Europe and the preparation of the Culture Work Plan which will succeed to the current one. This evaluation is therefore an important step in determining not only the success to date of the implementing tools, but also in identifying the key success and areas of improvement of the process itself in order to provide recommendations for the future.

Methodology

The research methodology was based on a set of evaluation questions, structured according to the principal evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. The following data research tools were used:

- Desk research, including review of the EU culture policy documents, outputs of the OMC working groups and SD platforms, and other documentation related to each implementing tool;

- Two online surveys including a survey for members of the OMC working groups and Cultural Affairs Committee (108 responses) and a survey of civil society representatives taking part in the work of SD platforms and European Culture Forums (288 responses);

- Qualitative and quantitative interviews including 13 with European Commission representatives, 11 with Cultural Affairs Committee members, 42 with representatives of OMC groups (including 4 interviews with Presidency representatives) and 46 with civil society stakeholders;

- A focus group with civil society representatives on 30 April 2013; and

- Country case studies on Austria, Estonia, Spain and Sweden.

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[1] Commission Communication on a European Agenda for Culture in a globalizing world; COM(2007) 242 final.

The evaluation methodology and data collected was sufficient to develop robust conclusions. The key strengths of the methodology were: the use of quantitative and qualitative research methods, the consultation of wide range of stakeholders, and the significant body of documents made available for the evaluation team on the functioning of the OMC working groups and SD platforms.

The key limitations of the methodology and data collection are related to the fact that the majority of interviews were undertaken with those directly involved in the OMC working groups and the Structured Dialogue process. This provided significant insights on the functioning and the work of each of the tools; but the views of those who are beyond the direct sphere of interest are represented to a smaller extent in the evaluation.

The online survey results provided valuable quantitative data for the evaluation, especially in terms of civil society organisations involved in the work of the Platforms and/or taking part in the European Culture Forums (results with a margin of error of 4.8%). However, the survey for the OMC working groups and Cultural Affairs Committee (CAC) members produced results with a margin of error of 8%, which meant any differences in responses between sub-groups of respondents were not statistically valid. This is partly due to the smaller total population size, which requires a relatively higher response rate in order to reduce the margin of error. In general conclusions are therefore drawn at the level of the tools as a whole, rather than at the level of individual OMC or Structured Dialogue themes (except where qualitative evidence can be used).

Conclusions concerning the Open Method of Coordination

Relevance

- Through the range of activity generated and level of participation and engagement, implementation has demonstrated the relevance of the Culture OMC process to the **policy objectives** set out in the Agenda for Culture.

- The **Work Plans for Culture** provide a set of priorities for the OMC working groups, which are relevant to a number of key EU policy objectives. An appropriate set of operating principles is provided, which reflect the political context, time and resources available and policy development needs of the sector. The Work Plan (WP) for Culture 2011-2014 provides an improved and more integrated guiding framework and better defined objectives, compared with the previous process (2008-2010). The provision for a mid-term review under the current Work Plan presents a valuable opportunity to assess the continued relevance of the priorities and target activities, and to make any necessary adjustments.

- The Culture OMC is consistent with the **wider set of OMC processes** being implemented across a range of EU policy areas. It has a distinct identity and modality appropriate to the specific conditions found in the field of culture policy, characterised by a high degree of subsidiarity, general absence of EU legislation and a diverse and fragmented sector in Europe.

- The **specificities** of the culture OMC process bring a number of positive benefits, including high levels of attendance, and providing valuable opportunities for individuals from different backgrounds to participate in high quality exchanges and mutual learning activities around issues of common interest. Communities and interest and knowledge networks are also developing as a result.

- The **Culture OMC** also brings potential weaknesses in terms of outputs that are too generalised, over-dependency on the effectiveness of the chair, variations in the level of expertise of participants, weak

(although improving) dissemination approaches and lack of effective mobilisation of research capacity for building a solid evidence-based approach.

- However, the changes made under the **second generation of OMC working groups,** (emphasising the need to agree well-defined, specific topics as early as possible in the process, and to define precisely the expected outputs), have provided clearer direction and helped to focus activity better, compared with the first set of OMC working groups.

- Overall, the **themes and topics** covered by both generations of the OMC process have proved equally relevant to policy-making at national and EU level and the working groups are meeting demand for mutual learning opportunities between Member States. The breadth of the topics and themes addressed by the OMC process (through sub-groups for example) has increased the relevance of the working groups to a wide range of participants. The evidence suggests a two-fold need is being met: to share and learn about practices in other countries, and to learn about and participate in the development of EU policies in areas of particular relevance to national interests. However, this has also meant sometimes struggling to quickly agree on an appropriate balance in terms of technical/non-technical content and on which issues deserve most attention, especially in the working groups for the period 2008-2010.

- The **European Added Value** of the Culture OMC lies primarily in providing opportunities for mutual learning on issues of common interest, which would not otherwise be available to participants. This allows knowledge to be made available at national level more effectively than would be the case through other routes (which should help decision-making), and links a wider cohort of governmental representatives to the EU policy-making level.

Effectiveness

- **Participation** in meetings was satisfactory overall. The mixture of officials, practitioners and external experts strengthened the quality of the activity carried out. Some members are more active than others, reflecting variations in the state of policy development between countries, varying expertise and competences, and resources. Some attend in order to share knowledge; others to listen and learn. Language is sometimes an obstacle. One of the most important factors to consider in terms of the profile of participants concerns individuals' connectivity to key decision-makers in their home country (e.g. in Ministries).

- The **outputs** of the second generation OMC show a marked improvement compared with those of the first generation OMC, as a result of more clearly defined subject areas and target outputs, and a re-orientation towards more practical material (guides, handbooks, tools etc.). There remains potential for further improvements in outputs, although a lack of time and research capacity means an evidence-based approach is not yet possible (whereas this could enhance the quality of the outputs developed).

- Under the initiative of the European Commission, significant efforts have been made to **disseminate** outputs at national level, via a range of channels, but this has been largely unstructured and a number of factors are limiting progress here, including the lack of connectivity between OMC country participants and national ministries, the low profile and lack of influence of some country participants, and issues around translation. Each country has to work within the constraints of its own national structures and systems.

- **Benefits and impacts** mainly concern mutual learning, best practice exchange and the building of knowledge networks, rather than any far-reaching effects on national policies. Although it is difficult to gauge the extent of the impact overall, some activity and outputs have fed through into impacts on national policy, and a proportion of these results appear directly attributable to the OMC.

- There is potential to achieve greater impacts, through stronger **connectivity and dissemination channels** between OMC participants and key decision-makers at national level. The use of dissemination plans of the outputs has been a useful development and should be developed further. Improvements in the quality of outputs (including a more thorough, evidence-based approach) should also encourage higher take-up.

- **Interaction** between the OMC working groups and the Structured Dialogue process has been limited and there are potential benefits from closer integration (for example it could bring a wider range of expertise to bear on common themes). The transversal aspect of culture policy has been addressed, but again to a rather limited extent within the working groups. The participation of external experts and efforts to engage with other DGs were useful components of the work of the OMC.

Efficiency

- The **organisation and management** of the OMC process has been efficient - support from the Commission and the working conditions are considered very positive. Characteristics of the process have been satisfactory overall.

- The **process adaptations** made for the second generation OMC have had a broadly positive effect in terms of applying a more specific mandate and defining intended outputs more precisely; but there is a risk that time pressure might negatively affect output quality in future.

- There is a strong preference among participants for **working interactively**, in small groups, and more advanced preparation and more activity between formal meetings would help participants to increase quality and improve productivity. More use of study visits would also potentially enhance interaction and engagement, and lead to improved results.

Sustainability

- The OMC has evolved through two generations (2008-2010 and 2011-2014) and as a result a number of **key improvements** have been implemented to increase focus and clarity. This has included an improvement in the quality of outputs, which should encourage wider take-up of results at national level.

- The OMC is **sustainable** in its current format. Further, incremental improvements could be made in a number of areas, while keeping the fundamental structure and process intact. For example there is potential to make further improvements to address weaknesses in certain, inter-linked areas (profile of participants, a more evidence-based approach to developing outputs and strengthening dissemination).

Conclusions concerning Structured Dialogue

Relevance

- At the time it was established the Platform model represented a **relevant mechanism** with the potential to address sectoral needs including strengthening advocacy capacity, encouraging trans-sectoral working among the cultural organisations and fostering dialogue between civil society and the Commission. Civil society organisations strongly welcomed the opportunities provided, and were committed to implementation.

- There is still a **need to continue dialogue** between civil society and the Commission, to support cross-sectoral working, structuring of civil society so that local, regional, national concerns feed into the dialogue process through representative interlocutors, bridging the gap between the EU institutions and the culture sector.

- The European **Culture Forums** are relevant tools for achieving the objectives set for Structured Dialogue especially in terms of exchanges of good practice, encouraging cross-sectoral awareness and increasing collaboration. They bring a number of benefits, including widening engagement in and awareness of European culture policies. Their openness to all organisations and individuals is a positive feature.

- The **themes** covered by Structured Dialogue tools were relevant to civil society organisations especially for their work at European level but the relevance decreased for cultural organisations active within the Member States. However, the themes covered by Structured Dialogue were not explicitly linked to the themes and priorities identified in the Council Work Plan for Culture and do not mirror the themes covered by OMC groups.

- The **European Added Value** of the Structured Dialogue tools is strongest in facilitating trans-sectoral cooperation, networking and exchanges among the culture sector representatives. Without the funding provided by the Commission it is unlikely that similar results could have been achieved by civil society organisations themselves. This is especially the case for the European Culture Forums, which are organised entirely by the European Commission.

- At the time it was set up, there was a need to complement other, more formal **consultation mechanisms**, especially those in the framework of legislative proposals and key policy documents. However, the potential added value of the Platforms in terms of consultation between civil society organisations and the European Commission was not exploited fully, at least in part because of the lack of a common understanding about ownership of the process and how it should work in practice.

Effectiveness

- Overall, **participation** was satisfactory in terms of geography, sector coverage and types of participants. However, smaller Member States and some sub-sectors (radio, architecture, youth and artistic crafts) appear to be comparatively under-represented. National cultural organisations are well represented in the Forums and Platform for Intercultural Europe but are not directly involved in the work of the other Platforms. Increasing engagement between the Platforms and national cultural organisations would bring a number of benefits in terms of wider engagement, stronger evidence base and increased links to the culture sector at national and local level.

- The quality of the **outputs** produced was satisfactory overall, but there is limited evidence on the extent to which these responded to the needs of the Commission, were used to inform policy process or reached a wide audience. The outputs would have benefitted from being underpinned by a stronger evidence base reflecting the concerns and views of wider cultural sector as well as organisations working at national level. In addition, more exchanges between the Commission and civil society on how the outputs would be used could help define and target them better.

- **Interaction** between the OMC and Structured Dialogue Platforms was limited, especially during the implementation of the first Council Work Plan for Culture 2008-2010. It improved significantly during the second phase, through increased participation of Platform representatives in the OMC groups. However, exchanges would benefit from alignment of the thematic areas covered by the two instruments, within the overall framework of the Council Work Plan.

- The **objectives** set for the Structured Dialogue process have been achieved in relation to bringing the sector closer together, increasing the capacity to undertake advocacy work at EU level, and opening up new opportunities for exchanges between civil society and the Commission. The Platforms brought together organisations that had never worked together before.

- The **benefits** of the process started to reduce after the first phase of the process, especially in relation to the dialogue with the Commission. This was the result of a number of factors including the need for clearer ownership of the process, limited visibility of the work of the Platforms among those not directly involved, member organisations and wider audiences. The work of the Platforms would have benefited from better alignment with the Council Work Plan for Culture and the OMC groups. This would have ensured that the outputs produced by the Platforms were disseminated more widely among the Member State representatives and would have increased the complementarity of the two initiatives.

- **The impact** of the work of the Platforms at national level is comparatively low, beyond capacity-building and network effects. There was a lack of opportunity for national members to feed into the work of the Platforms and there is a low visibility of their outputs at national level. The PIE is the exception here since its membership includes national organisations, unlike the other two Platforms.

- **European Culture Forums** have played a valuable role in increased awareness of European culture policies and in improving cooperation among sector organisations. The opportunities for networking, exchanges and debate was emphasised by large number of survey respondents as an area for improvement of the forums.

Efficiency

- **Mainstreaming** of culture has been addressed by all three Platforms, and the interpretation and approach was very different for each one. Thematic areas covered were often very transversal, e.g. the Platform for Intercultural Europe (PIE) discussed such issues as education and social inclusion. The nature of the membership of the Platforms ensured that the transversal nature of the culture policy was addressed. The participation of external experts and efforts to engage with other Directorates-General of the European Commission were a key part of the work of the Platforms.

- Each Platform developed its own **management structures** and organisational arrangements leading to very different approaches. This sometimes created tensions, lack of transparency and inconsistencies. For example, PIE developed an institutionalised approach with very different membership structure from the other platforms bringing together European networks, national organisations and private individuals. While the Platform on Access to Culture (ACP) and the Platform

on Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) were set up to bring together existing networks in a less institutionalised way.

- Stakeholders are generally satisfied with the **organisation of the European Culture Forum (ECF)** by the Commission. These events provide a valuable contribution in terms of engaging a wide range of cultural and civil society organisations in EU policy work and there is a strong case for continuation of the support provided.

Sustainability

- The extent to which **Platforms** depend on the financial support for the Commission depends on the set up of the Platform, the sectors and the scope of activities. For example, the CCI already operate without dedicated funding, with a strong potential for sustainability. It is likely that some advocacy work for all three Platforms could continue without further funding. However, dissemination, research, project activities, involvement of the organisations from wider range of Member States would not be possible without financial support.

- The **European Culture Forums** could not exist without the support from the EU. They make a valuable contribution to the implementation of the Agenda for Culture and should continue as an initiative organised and funded by the Commission, largely following the current format.

Recommendations

Culture OMC

1. Consider producing more detailed guidance to describe the key competences, profile and participants for OMC working groups, to be shared with Member States to encourage them to nominate members with sufficient knowledge and influence to enhance the visibility and quality of the groups.

2. Continue and reinforce the focus on concrete outputs in the OMC working groups, while also considering the provision of more research capacity and support to working groups to assist them to produce stronger outputs, more efficiently (either through research support from within the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) or via a service contract with external providers).

3. Also consider extending the duration of the working group cycle, for example to include one or two additional meetings.

4. Retain and further develop the use of dissemination plans for OMC outputs and in collaboration with Member States consider how more resources can be made available to translate more outputs in order to improve dissemination.

5. Consider ways in which a wider range of locations and formats for meetings might be introduced for the OMC working groups, while maintaining an appropriate balance between formal and informal activity (such as study visits).

Structured Dialogue

6. Dialogue between civil society and the Commission should continue, but the way the Platforms are organised in this respect post-2013 needs to be revised. It is important to build on what has been achieved so far especially in terms of increasing the advocacy capacity of the sector, cross-sectoral cooperation and developing the framework for exchanges between civil society and the Commission. However, it is important to address the issues that started to appear during the last few years, such as the need to clarify the ownership of the process, increase visibility of the Platforms among those not directly involved,

7. Realigning the work of the Platforms to the Council Work Plan is likely to offer a number of benefits such as increasing dialogue between OMC working groups, civil society and the Commission; introduce the flexibility of adjusting the themes on the basis of the needs; introduce the possibility for mid-term review of the implementation process and allowing a stock-take mid-way through the implementation of the Work Plans.

8. The ownership of the dialogue process needs to be clarified. On the one hand, civil society organisations should take the lead in terms of developing common positions, identifying common issues that are agreed among wide range of stakeholders. On the other hand, the Commission should play a larger role in setting out the framework for implementation of the dialogue process. Rigidity and unnecessary institutionalisation of structures should be avoided and greater flexibility and adaptability introduced where possible.

9. Participation in the dialogue process needs to be built on flexible participation, where all the organisations interested to contribute have an opportunity to take part, according to circumstances (capacity, resources, theme etc.), not just members of a platform. Participation should also be as transparent as possible and the criteria harmonised among thematic areas, where national level organisations also have opportunities to contribute.

10. The involvement of national level organisations should be considered as a necessary condition for European civil society to engage in the dialogue process. This could take place through a variety of forms such as providing opportunities for member organisations to contribute to the outputs produced, undertaking tailored consultations on specific issues, or through surveys, events and/or projects.

11. Funding for civil society organisations needs to focus on specific initiatives and projects with minimal support for administrative functions. This could take place for example through providing funding for research projects, events and workshops that have potential to feed into the policy process.

12. European Culture Forums should continue to be organised by the Commission in order to build on the success of the events to bring wide range of the organisations together, exchange of good practice and increasing awareness of EU culture policy. Future forums should increase the opportunities for discussions, debates, networking and interaction among participants. This means potentially shifting the balance from plenary sessions and lectures to the provision of more interactive formats